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Fundamentals of Creative Writing Eng 220

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Water Bottles

His entire life Joshua had been trying to quench a thirst labeled, “Dad’s affection.” He’d compete with his father’s work, with golf, with everything. He sometimes wondered what it would be like to hear his dad say, “I love you, son,” just once. Instead, his father looked at him as if were crazy, though not without justification as Joshua was considered odd by many of those around him. He would often be found licking trees or collecting plastic water bottles for no apparent reason.

In elementary school, little seven year old Joshua missed the bus one day because he watched a bird building its nest. He had to call his parents to come to pick him up. As his dad pulled into the parking lot, he rolled down the window and stuck his head out, his brown hair was neatly combed back. Joshua often tried to copy it with his own brown hair, but it always turned out too greasy. His dad yelled, “Get in, I’m not waiting all day!”

So Joshua scampered on his two athletic legs into the back seat with his camo backpack and met his dad’s eyes in the mirror. They had deep shadows under them and his frustration wrinkle, the one directly in between his eyebrows, was extremely furrowed. It had been a hard day and things at work were overly stressful. The clients he was working with were extremely reluctant to sell. He wanted to take his anger out on something as he started driving away.

“What kept you?” He asked in his raspy voice. He was wearing his usual golf shirt and white slacks.

Joshua was so excited to be with his dad. He couldn’t wait to tell him about the pretty red birds. “I was watching birds!”

“I left my golf game early because of this? It was with some very important clients. Get your head out of the clouds. It’s worthless to do things like watch birds. Someday you’ll learn.”

Joshua’s countenance immediately fell. He looked at his hands, trying not to cry. The big meany could never understand how he felt.

Joshua’s dad looked back in the mirror and saw his sensitive little son looking shameful. He felt guilty but knew that the boy needed to man up, even so, he was still a boy. Joshua’s father took a deep breath to calm down. His tone had a hint of pity as he said, “Do you want this?” He was holding a plastic water bottle over his shoulder, extended back towards Joshua.

“What is it?” Joshua asked.

“Are you blind? It’s a water bottle.”

“What’s it for?”

“My golf game. But because I had to pick someone up from school, I’m not going to use it.” He continued to hold it out for Joshua to have. He said, “Do you want it or not?”

“I’ll take it, Dad.”

He threw it back and it hit the seat next to Joshua.

Joshua picked it up and hugged his little present from his dad. The last time his dad had given him a gift was three years ago when for Christmas when his dad gave him the old wooden car that had originally been passed down to him when he was Joshua’s age. As Joshua happily stared at his plastic water bottle he wondered if he would give his future son water bottles. “Did your dad give you a water bottle too?”

“What? No. Why, how could you even think that?” He said.

“Why you’d give it to me...”

“I’ve got no purpose for it.” He said, glaring at Joshua in his car mirror. That boy always asked so many questions: Not natural.

There, under the glare of his father, it was the first time Joshua started wondering if he had no purpose too.

In middle school, for his thirteenth birthday, Joshua’s dad took him on a hike where they loaded their backpacks full of plastic water bottles. As they gulped them down one by one, they put the empty bottles back into their packs. Joshua’s dad pointed out all the different plants while Joshua pointed out all the different birds. They had a competition on who could find the most variety. They laughed together as they walked along. Each water bottle they emptied was proof that they had spent time together. Even so, Joshua couldn’t help but wonder if at the bottom of the mountain his dad wouldn’t simply forget all about him. At the end of their hike, his dad went to go throw away all of the empty bottles, but Joshua stopped him.

“Wait,” he said, “Let's reuse them.” Joshua wanted something to remember this event. He wanted a way to make this moment last longer. He wanted to prove that he wasn’t just something that could be thrown away when it's time was finished.

“Not worth it.”

“But dad-”

“Listen here son, if the water‘s gone, then they have no purpose. If it doesn’t have a purpose, get rid of it. Do I have to explain everything to you?”

“We can refill them.”

“Are you some green hippie now? These things will only weigh you down. Just throw them away. When they’re out, they’re out.” Joshua’s dad felt it somehow urgent to teach his son to be a normal person and deal with situations in a normal way. Any normal person would just throw the empty bottles away. All those different-like thoughts would lead to more thoughts of the same, which leads to questionable actions, which leads to bad life decisions where you find yourself in front of a crowd protesting pasteurized meat. No son of his was going to start turning into some weird activist.

“Please, Dad.”

“No. Get over it.” Then his dad took the water bottles and chucked them into the dumpster.

Later that year, Joshua brought home a picture he drew in art class. The detailed watercolor had careful lines that created an almost perfectly symmetrical feeling. The lighting and shadows created through focus and dedication really gave the painting it’s life. Through deep study of its contents one might evoke a feeling that everything has worth and a purpose. The painting was a water bottle, which Joshua had spent hours working on. He was excited to show it to his parents.

At home, Joshua found his dad in front of the TV watching one of his favorite talk shows. His dad asked him for the remote but Joshua was more eager to show him his art.

His dad took one look at it and said, “That thing is garbage.”

For a long second they both sat with no words, just the sound of someone on the TV going crazy with a lip sync song and a wig. It was at this moment that Joshua’s dad realized he had said something that hurt his son.

Joshua was the first to speak.

“...I’ll go take it to my room then. Sorry I showed it to you.”

Joshua’s dad gave his shoulder a little shove. “I’m just joking. Can’t you take a joke?”

“Haha,” He said with a weak smile.

“Don’t give me that attitude. Are you trying to make me feel guilty? Get over it, kid. A joke is just a joke.”

“Right, Dad.”

“Stop moping. Look, a water bottle is kind of useless. They are replaceable and have no real worth, you know. You can’t blame me for thinking it to be garbage.”

“Yup.” Joshua looked around the room and found the remote. “Here’s the remote,” Then he tossed it to his father. He was done with this conversation.

Joshua went to his room and threw the painting on his bed. He sat down in the chair at his desk and put his head in his hands, holding his eyes from leaking. The words trash, useless and worthless, were running through his mind, over and over again. No matter what it seemed like he tried, it only got worse. He finally settled on the fact that his dad would never understand him.

Years pass and Joshua finds himself a junior in his highschool years. By this time Joshua had become a cool kid with tight jeans and an oversized shirt. Looking back at some of his father’s old photos, Joshua realized he was the spitting image of the man: The same brown eyes, the same sharp nose. In comparing photos, they might be mistaken for the same person.

On one occasion, they were outside in the backyard, having finished some yard work. Joshua’s father was tired and a bit frustrated, having to take his usually restful Saturday building a table for the storage in the garage. They were resting against the house in the shade looking at the finished project. Joshua’s father took a swig from his plastic water bottle and passed one to Joshua. Joshua had done a good job sanding… but his father wasn’t about to tell him that.

Joshua looked at his plastic water bottle and twisted it open. A thought crossed his mind. “You know how we get thirsty for water? Do we get thirsty for other things too? Like peace or knowledge?” … or affection, Joshua mentally added.

“I think you think too much. Besides, none of that really matters,” his father said.

“Right, dad. It doesn’t matter,” Joshua said. He was thinking about the times he and his father were together. He remembered the time his dad picked him up from school when he missed the bus. The hike together, the outdoor project, it all seemed to flash in the front of his mind.

Joshua asked, “But what if we didn’t need to thirst for things anymore. What if we could just be happy where we’re at?”

“Why are we still having this conversation?”

“Right dad. It doesn’t matter.”

Even with this said, Joshua continued to think about it. His relationship with his father wasn’t perfect, but at least he had one. He wondered if what he was missing wasn’t a lack of affection, but rather a lack of appreciation. Joshua knew the water bottle would eventually go empty. He knew his dad would eventually go back inside. He knew all of this but he didn’t care. As he rested there, under the fall heat, he enjoyed the moment of simple satisfaction. He enjoyed being there with his dad.

Since then, Joshua became a Father. Barely reaching age thirty, he’s got a little pot-belly and big hands with the same athletic legs. He found his son, the six-year old big-eyed boy, taking plastic water bottles and pouring them down the sink. Joshua caught him in the act and set the boy on his lap.

“James, what’re you doing?”

“I’m watching the water go down. Look dad!” Joshua gave his son the water bottle and watched as the boy poured it down the sink.

“See! Look, look!” James was talking about how the water hit the sink and created a flow, how the flow got smaller as the water drained. He was talking about how the light reflected off the water in quick flashes, however, as a seven year old child, he did not have the ability to communicate the wonders he was experiencing.

“You like that?” Joshua asked his son.

James nodded and Joshua tickled him.

“You’re a strange little boy, you know that?”

The boy giggled and squirmed at his father’s touch. Joshua had mercy on the child and stopped to give him time to breathe. He picked up another water bottle and opened it. He drank it half gone then gave it to his son.

“Remember to drink the water too. I don’t want you ever going thirsty. I love you, son.”

“Thanks dad! I love you too!”